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ABSTRACT

An analysis of criticism leveled against student grading is presented, and a rebuttal is offered. Twenty-two criticisms of grades are divided into four categories: that grades are meaningless, unimportant, unnecessary, and harmful. In response to the criticism, it is pointed out that grading tends to motivate student achievement, provides rewards for effort, and offers periodic information to parents and others on pupil progress. Criticism is noted to be generated mainly by teachers and administrators, rather than by parents and students. Two alternatives to grading which are frequently suggested by critics are detailed written reports about student achievement and problems, and parent-teacher conferences. In defending grading against the criticisms, it is pointed out that (1) grading can be improved: (2) some of the criticisms are unreasonable or based on improper contrasts: (3) their symbolic value does not make them meaningless: (4) poor grades are the result, not the cause, of student failure or success: and (5) grades are not the only evaluative technique used to assess student progress or achievement. (MH)

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Shall We Get Rid of Grades?

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Robert. L. Ebel

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Grades are essentially meaningless, educationally unimportant, unnecessary, and even harmful, say the critics. Dr. Robert L. Ebel, professor of education at Michigan State University, disagrees. He lists 22 of the most common criticisms of grades, and argues that many of them are mutually inconsistent, others are not supported by experience and experiment, and still others are inaccurate or irrelevent. Some criticisms, on the other hand, seem valid, but the remedy "is not to get rid of grades, but simply to do a better job of grading."

Dr. Ebel provides a rationale for the grading system and discusses some of the alternatives which have been proposed, such as detailed written reports and parent-teacher conferences. He argues that these are less cost efficient and, perhaps more important, less informative than that familiar summary statistic, the grade.

A past president of the American Educational Research Association, Dr. Ebel is the author of various tests, test reviews, and articles on measurement, and is editor of *Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Fourth Edition*.

CJF

Robert L. Ebel

From time to time, various leaders in education have suggested that schools ought to "get rid of grades." They have mentioned a number of reasons why such a change would be desirable. The ones most commonly expressed are set out below under four major headings.

A. Grades are essentially meaningless
   1. There is great diversity among institutions and teachers in grading practices.
   2. Many schools lack definite grading policies.
   3. A single symbol cannot possibly report adequately the complex details of an educational achievement.
   4. Teachers are often casual or even careless in grading.
   5. Grades are frequently used to punish or to enforce discipline rather than to report achievement accurately.

B. Grades are educationally unimportant
   6. Grades are only symbols.
   7. The most important outcomes are intangible and hence cannot be assessed or graded.
   8. A teacher's grades are less important to a pupil than his own self-evaluations.
   9. Grades do not predict later achievement correctly.
   10. What should be evaluated is the educational program, not the pupils.

C. Grades are unnecessary
   11. Grades are ineffective motivators of real achievement in education.
   12. When students learn mastery, as they should, no differential levels of achievement remain to be graded.

13. Grades have persisted in schools mainly because teachers cling to traditional practices.

D. Grades are harmful

14. Low grades may discourage the less able pupils from efforts to learn.
15. Grading makes failure inevitable for some pupils.
16. Parents sometimes punish pupils for low grades, and reward high grades inappropriately.
17. Grades set universal standards for all pupils despite their great individual differences.
18. Grading emphasizes common goals for all pupils and discourages individuality in learning.
19. Grading rewards conformity and penalizes creativity.
20. Grading fosters competition rather than cooperation.
21. Pressure to get high grades leads some pupils to cheat.
22. Grading is more compatible with subject-centered education than with humanistic, child-centered education.

Some of these criticisms appear to be mutually inconsistent. How can grades be both harmful and unimportant? In some of them, there may be considerable truth.[1] Others seem not to be soundly supported

"They support grading because grades help them to teach well."

by experiment, experience, or logical inference.[2] Still others combine some lack of accuracy with some deficiency in relevance.[3] The remedy for problems pointed out in some of them[4] is not to get rid of grades, but simply to do a better job of grading.

A Rationale for Grading

A number of these criticisms fairly beg for immediate answers. But it may be more constructive to first present a basic rationale for grading as part of the instructional process. It is the rationale that has persuaded most educators to support a system of grading in the institutions they serve. To say that grading persists simply because teachers tend to follow tradition blindly is to do a grave injustice to hundreds of thousands of capable and dedicated teachers. They support grading because grades help them to teach well.

[1]viz. 1, 2, 4, 14, 16

[2]viz. 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15

[3]viz. 3, 5, 6, 9, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22

[4]viz. 1, 2, 4, 5, 14, 15, 16

Grading systems exist because most educators recognize that effective learning requires the active participation of the learner, that this participation costs considerable effort, and that the necessary effort is most likely to be put forth when success in learning is recognized and rewarded. As most teachers know from their own experience, differential grading does tend to motivate and direct study, and to provide tangible and prompt rewards for the efforts expended.

It has been said that pupils should learn for the sake of learning, not for the sake of grades. But this is a false antithesis. High grades and effective learning are not alternative goals. They are closely parallel, if not identical. When properly given, high grades report success in learning. One who works for high grades does so by working for maximum learning.

"High grades and effective learning are not alternative goals."

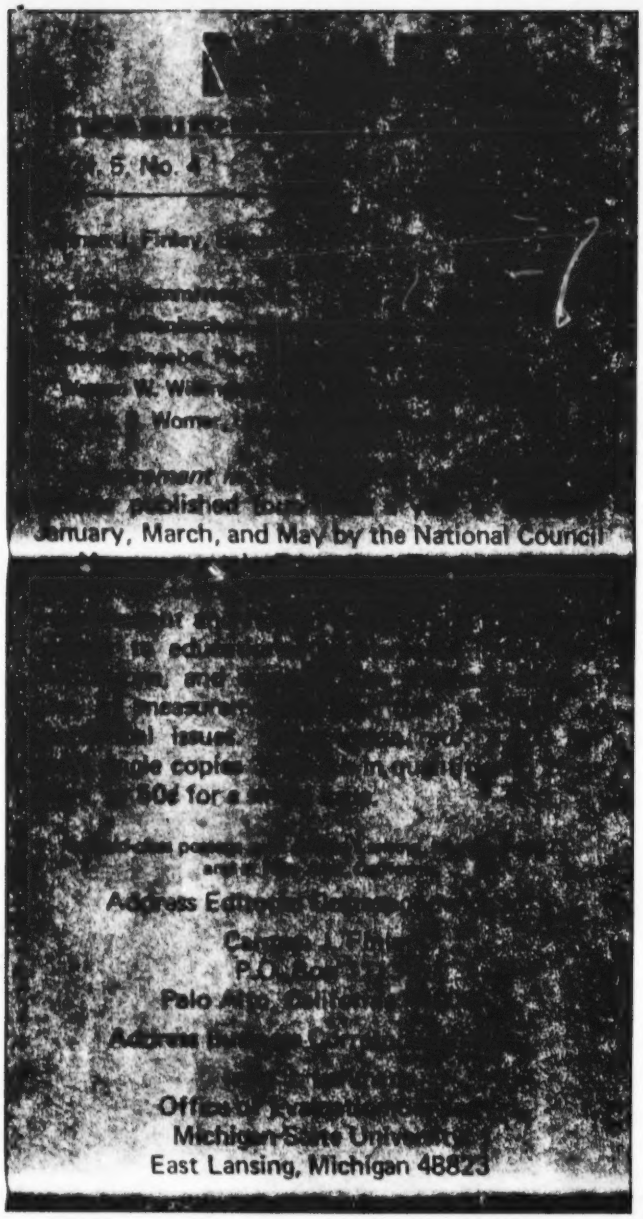
When differential grading is replaced by broad category (pass-fail) grading or by blanket grading (the same high grade for all regardless of effort or achievement), the almost universal experience is that efforts to learn and levels of achievement decline. Students who take differentially graded and broad category courses during the same school term report that they spend most of their time studying for the differentially graded courses.[5] Quite understandably they put their efforts where the efforts are likely to make a difference.

Another reason why grading systems exist is to report, periodically and systemically, a pupil's educational achievements to the pupil, to his parents, to his advisors, and to all others interested in his educational progress. The facilitation of learning is a complex and difficult process. It proceeds best when all concerned can cooperate actively in it. Cooperation requires information, and grades provide a concise summary of some of the needed information. A grade almost always summarizes a vast amount of specific detail. Often that summary is all that is wanted; all that would be used effectively. But in some cases the grade simply serves notice that a problem exists and that arrangements should be made to investigate the problem more thoroughly.

Opponents of Grading

It is worth noting that opposition to grades comes most frequently from inside the educational establishment. It comes from teachers who must determine and justify the grades. It comes from administrators who must deal with unhappy parents whose children seem to be doing poorly in school. It does not come from

[5]Karlins, J.K., M. Kaplin, and W. Stuart. "Academic attitudes and performance as a function of a differential grading system: An evaluation of Princeton's pass-fail system." *Journal of Experimental Education*, 1969, 37:38-50.



the students who earn the grades, or from the parents who are anxious about them. Proposals to abandon grades, or to shift to some less definite, and less informative, alternative to differential grade almost invariably encounter opposition from parents. Excellence in scholarship is but one of many kinds of excellence that is valued in the world of affairs. Perhaps it is natural for them not to honor a kind of excellence that contributed little to their success. But they err if they conclude from this that success in learning ought not to be recognized and honored in anyone else.

Alternatives to Grades in Educational Evaluation

Many of the educational leaders who urge schools to get rid of grades disclaim any intention of doing away with educational evaluation. But clearly, most of them are less than enthusiastic about it. They tend to accept it somewhat grudgingly and of necessity. Their advocacy of change puts more stress on ending a practice than on replacing it with something better. Their arguments focus more on the evils of the old than on benefits of the new. They seem to be more interested in avoiding the problems and stresses of grading than in the improvement of learning. Beset with a multitude of pressures, as many educational leaders are, it is quite understandable if they welcome the opportunity to get rid of one source of problems, especially when it can be done in the name of progress.

Those who endorse educational evaluation do not always say clearly whether what they have in mind is pupil evaluation, or program evaluation, or both. The two are quite different, and those who emphasize either have quite different views of learning. Those who believe that the pupil's own efforts have little to do with his success in learning, or that pupil evaluations can make little positive contribution to the motivation and direction of those efforts, see no reason to retain pupil evaluations. They prefer to emphasize program evaluation in the belief that a pupil's achievement in learning depends almost entirely on the appropriateness and quality of the educational

"Those who endorse educational evaluation do not always say clearly whether what they have in mind is pupil evaluation, or program evaluation, or both."

program that is offered to him. Such educators make up a minority of the whole profession but may be a majority among advocates of child-centered, humanistic education.

Those who do believe in pupil evaluations but who also want to get rid of grades, insist that there are better means than grades for reporting pupil evaluations. Two of the most frequently mentioned alternatives are (1) detailed written reports of the pupil's achievements and problems, and (2) parent-teacher conferences. Either of these *could* report a grade, or something equivalent to it, along with considerable information on other aspects of achievement. Teachers who use these alternatives, however, typically avoid getting very specific about the child's level of achievement relative to his classmates. Although the alternatives are often supported as being more informative, it is safe to say that they typically give the parent less information than a grade would give about a pupil's relative level of achievement in his class.

Surely a grade is not all a parent needs to know about the learning problems of a child who is having difficulties in school. But just as surely it calls attention to these difficulties and stimulates corrective action. Few pupils or parents regard the information provided by a grade as "irrelevant", which some educators have claimed that it is. They know better

than that, and so should the educator, whether he approves of grades or not.

A third alternative to grades is what is sometimes called "continuous reporting of progress". As each assignment, exercise, or project is completed, it is evaluated and the evaluation reported to the pupil. No one can deny the educational value of such reports. But there can be serious doubt that it provides an adequate substitute for systematic, periodic, summary assessments of achievement. It provides only a sketchy basis for somewhat ambiguous reports to parents, and yields no convenient data for a cumulative record of educational progress.

In considering alternative methods of pupil evaluation, it is important to pay attention to their cost benefit ratios. In this respect, written reports and parent-teacher conferences seldom show up as well as grades. While it is not simple or easy to determine, report, and defend valid grades, that task is usually less costly of time and effort than the task of preparing a valid, informative written report, or of preparing for a productive parent-teacher conference. Further, grading seldom costs any loss of time for instruction, while the alternatives often do. Whether the alternatives contribute enough indirectly to the facilitation of learning to make up for the direct loss of time for teaching is open to question.

". . . even if the alternatives to grades could be made equally informative and cost efficient, they would not escape most of the criticisms that have been leveled at grades."

Finally, it is worth noting that of the 22 criticisms of grades listed at the beginning of this paper, all but two (3 and 13) also can be made of other modes of pupil evaluation. Thus even if the alternatives to grades could be made equally informative and cost efficient, they would not escape most of the criticisms that have been leveled at grades.

Response to Some Criticisms of Grades

Let us turn briefly to consideration of some of the criticisms of grades listed at the beginning of this paper. Some of them (1, 2, 4, and 5) can be answered by doing a better job of grading. Others seems to make unreasonable demands on grades. Grades were never intended to report on the complex details of achievement (3). Their job is simply to report the general level of achievement. They are indeed "only symbols" (6), but this does not make them meaningless or useless. Much of the information we need comes to us via symbols. What is any word or number but a symbol? And while it is true that grades predict subsequent achievement imperfectly (9), this should not discredit grading. More perfect grades would predict later achievement better, but even the best of them cannot

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be expected to be perfect predictors. Future achievements depend on much more than past achievements—on effort, opportunity, and luck, among other things.

Several of the criticisms seem to be based on improper or unnecessary contrasts. There is no need to decide whether grades are more or less valuable than self-evaluations (8). The two are not mutually exclusive. Grades can contribute to valid self-evaluations. Nor is there any valid distinction between pupil-centered and subject-centered education (22). All good teachers recognize that their pupils are individual human beings. But this does not keep them from trying to help those pupils learn useful subject matter. This does not keep them from instructing pupils in groups, whenever that seems to be advantageous (18). Finally, the contrast between cooperation and competition (20) is also somewhat spurious. Grading emphasizes individual achievement more than it emphasizes competition. Individual achievement does not require limiting the achievement of others. Indeed many students have found cooperation very helpful in their pursuit of individual excellence.

"There is no need to decide whether grades are more or less valuable than self evaluation. The two are not mutually exclusive."

Of the remaining criticisms, let us consider only the five (7, 12, 14, 15, and 16) that are mentioned most frequently and taken most seriously by educators. An important outcome of education cannot possibly be intangible (7). To be important, it must make a noticeable difference. If it does, it is not intangible. If it does, it can be measured. For all that measurement requires is that a difference in some characteristic can be observed and verified objectively. Out of a collection of such observed differences a scale can be constructed. Any objective that can be defined clearly enough for purposeful instruction has also been defined clearly enough for objective measurement.

Mastery learning has recently become a popular concept (12). Even where mastery can be defined clearly, which is in a small minority of fields of study, it does not insure identity of achievement in learning. For some will learn faster and more than others. Their achievements are greater, and should be so reported to any who are interested in the progress of learning. It is simply not true that mastery learning results in no overall differences in levels of achievement.

A major concern about grading, especially among teachers in the primary grades, is the discouraging effects of low grades on certain pupils (14) and the inevitability of failure for certain others (15). The first things to note about these criticisms is that the low grades did not cause the low achievement. They simply report it. The second thing to note is that such problems are not likely to occur if the educational program, and the basis for evaluating achievement, is appropriate to the pupil in question. No good school and no good teacher will ask any pupil to achieve the impossible or even the improbable. Any pupil who has done as well as can be reasonably expected should never be given a low or failing grade. The problem these criticisms refer to is not a problem of grading. It is a problem of instruction.

Finally, consider the problem of parents who respond inappropriately to low grades, or even to high grades. The frequency and degree of seriousness of abuses in this area can easily be overestimated, but unquestionably such abuses do occur. The obvious answer is to attempt to educate parents away from abuses of these kinds. If this has been tried and has failed, the only humane recourse may be to withhold grades from particular parents. Surely such abuses do not constitute a valid argument against the use of grades in general.

Concluding Comments

The test of any system of grading, or of any change in grading practices, is the contribution it makes, or the harm it does, to pupil learning. If a school system has a comprehensive, systematic program for measuring educational achievements accurately, it should have no trouble, theoretically, in finding out whether, in the long run, the use, or the abandonment, of grades has been beneficial or harmful. But few school systems have such measurement programs. Few maintain constant long-run programs of instruction which permit the study of effects of a single variable. And few school patrons are willing to accept the danger of adverse consequences simply to test the effect of some proposed change. So decisions on grading policies are likely to continue to be based more on experience and rational inference than on experimental data.

Beware of sweeping statements to the effect that "research has shown" this or that. Most educational research studies are conducted on a small scale in special circumstances, in a constantly changing educational environment. What the research actually showed may be only a small part of what the writer who cites it seems to claim. Further, if the point is important and the data highly relevant, the educator who uses research data to support an argument ought to present the data and not just mention it as existing somewhere.

The concerns of teachers, and the debates in educational journals, support the belief that pupil evaluation presents a basic issue of educational policy. The issue focuses on two questions:

1. Does a pupil's own effort to learn make a substantial contribution to his success in learning?
2. Do periodic, systematic, summary evaluations of achievement contribute to the motivation and direction of his efforts to learn?

If the answer to both questions is an unqualified yes, as I believe it is, then we should not get rid of grades.